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ABSTRACT

Role expectations for the public school superintendent have outstripped the capacity of most individuals to fill them. Superintendents must now deal with an ever-increasing number of political interest groups who raise complex issues for the school system. In light of these developments, the tenure of superintendents is politically hazardous as evidenced by the high turnover rates of chief school officers. Many authors have provided insights into the role-definition problems of superintendents. The most oftcited environmental change in education is tied to collective negotiations laws. Superintendents, far from being in an imperial position, are often caught between the community's demands and the demands of the unions. Striking a balance between administrative autonomy and responsiveness to school board and constituent desires is another critical problem for the school superintendent. Because of these issues, the role of the superintendent must change. Superintendents must acknowledge the areas where they have the expertise to contribute to debate and policy and the areas where they do not. Negotiating with teacher unions may be one area where superintendents do not have sufficient expertise. Besides role definitions, graduate training programs for superintendents must change. Further course work that integrates politics, law, and policy-making in local school systems seems warranted. (Author/JM)

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Beyond the Myth of the Imperial School Superintendent

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The Problem

A crisis in confidence in educational leadership has been voiced in many quarters over the last decade. The crisis in confidence has political dimensions. School superintendents, political actors to be sure have frequently been the lightning rods for criticism. The simple thesis here is that the role expectations for chief school officers have outstripped the capacity of most individuals to fulfill all roles.

After attending a recent conference of the New York State Council of School District Administrators (NYSCSDA), I made certain unobtrusive observations. Superintendents commented, occasionally with vehemance, about the diverse, fragmented, and conflicting interest groups which made demands on them. It was reasonably clear that superintendents felt inadequate in trying to be all things to all constituents. This is not startling because it is impossible to be all things to all people.

In 1977 superintendents are routinely expected to execute duties involving teacher negotiations, school lunches, ribbon snippings, federal and state education guidelines, work-study programs, football jerseys and retirement dinners. A century ago chief school administrators were primarily responsible for insuring sound educational programs. Not only have the role expectations broadened, but also, education interest groups have grown in number. The expansion of interested interest groups has been accompanied by the emergence of complicated policy issues that may or may not be fully understood by school superintendents.

Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak, in their nationwide study of school governance, write that a superintendent's "primary resource is his reputation for professional expertise in matters pertaining to education."[1] Lay school

boards are described as inclined to defer to the superintendent's expertise, and the existence of the "deference norm" suggests the possibility of a dominant, perhaps imperial, chief school administrator. History informs us, nevertheless, that "emperors" rarely resign their throne. Current circumstances in local school districts, however, indicate "emperors," chief school administrators, are resigning from their positions in ever-escalating numbers. Therein lies the fallacy in the concept of an imperial superintendent. Imperial rule suggests stability, and the position and the incumbent chief school administator is hardly stable. Furthermore, expertise is finite, and expertness may not extend in equal doses to all educational matters much less political issues.

Selected research centering on school superintendents will be reviewed with an eye toward redefining the role of chief school administrators in the political context of local school systems. If resignations mirror a crisis of confidence in educational leadership, then educational leaders must understand the political parameters and historical roots of the crisis.

Historical Antecedents and Research on School Superintendents

Other writers have described the role of the chief school administrator and have commented on conflicting role demands.[2] Urban forces affecting the performance of superintendents have been well documented.[3] The earliest indepth case study of the toppling of a school superintendent with a national reputation, Willard Goslin, was published in 1951.[4] The pre-eminence of superintendents' influence in local educational decisions, nevertheless, persists in the literature while, at the same time, they face the prospect of shorter terms of office. For instance, on the latter point, one indication of the anxiety of chief school officers can be found in the program of the 1977 Annual Meeting, NYSCSDA. The conference program, billed as "A Look

Ahead," lists two sessions on retirement advice, two meetings on "How to be Selected--and Retained!--as a Chief School Officer"; and one colloquium on "Career Changes--New Options for the Chief School Administrator." To alter a line from The King and I--is this a puzzlement?

There are historical origins for explaining the role confusion of present day superintendents. Callahan divides the evolution of the office of the chief school administrator, with its corresponding shifts in role expectations, into four distinct periods. Prior to 1910, superintendents assumed the stance of educator-scholars. That is, they operated as knowledgeable pedagogues. A second era, roughly 1910-1930, was initiated with the introduction of Taylor's scientific management concepts, which attempted to apply business and industrial values to educational practices. The wholesale adoption of "efficiency" measures was branded an "American tragedy" by Callahan, for he argues the blind acceptance of industrial management concepts too frequently bore little relevance to the educational establishment's mission of educating children.[5] The efficiency norm survived in school administration for decades, and it can be detected in contemporary calls for "accountability" and "cost-effectiveness." A third period (1930-1950) conceptualizes the chief school administrator as the "statesman." The present picture of the school superintendent, re-enforced by graduate training programs in school administration, emphases expertise in the applied social sciences. Furthermore, with the emergence of collective bargaining in the 1960's, superintendents were ushered into teacher negotiations as the school board's bargaining agent. Although overarching eras of school leadership patterns may be evident, it may also be said that the gradual shifts carried a cumulative effect with regard to constituent expectations for a chief school administrator.

Cuban took issue with Callahan's typology of leadership epochs by declaring the "dominance of particular ideal types simply was not as clear-cut as Callahan suggests."[6] Cuban finds room for each ideal type in each period outlined above, thus, he explicitly endorses the belief that at any given point in this century, a given superintendent might possess attributes of each ideal. His qualitative portraits of urban superintendents Willis, Hansen, and Spears offer evidence that they manifested qualities of each ideal type. These urban chiefs, nevertheless, found it difficult to cope with pressing outside opposition, and each, in the end, left office. The conclusion for Cuban: "There are fall, summer, spring, and winter superintendents--but none for all seasons."

From the beginning of the establishment of the office, the chief school administrator has been responsible to the lay school board who hires him, and he has been charged with responding to internal and external challenges to his authority. Many, including Willis, Hansen and Spears, railed at the "meddling" of outside educational interest groups in policy areas that were once the exclusive domain of the "professionals." In fact, the argument advanced by superintendents and applied to educational interest groups is not unlike the lament of law enforcement officials in the 1960's who charged that the Warren Court, by upholding the constitutionality of rights afforded those arrested of crimes, was intervening in police work to the point where cops were, in effect, "handcuffed." The literature is peppered with examples of a bunker mentality on the part of incumbent superintendents.

Nolte writes in The American School Board Journal:

> . . . any survey of school superintendents will show increasing numbers within this top eschelon of education professionals are complaining. They're grousing about high casualty rates and about factory-type accountability plans that emasculate the traditional power of the American school superintendent. Accusatory fingers often stained by

> sour grapes, are being pointed, not only at accountability conscious school boards, but at the courts, parents, pressure groups, politicians, press, police, and pupils.[8]

The lesson of this may be that although the role expectations for the superintendent have expanded, the capacity of the chief school administrator to respond to, or even to accurately pinpoint, interest group challenges to educational practice has not kept pace with an ever-enlarging environmental dissonance.

The The most off-cited environmental change in education is tied to collective negotiations laws. School superintendents and other educational interest groups widely perceive such laws as having fundamentally altered the relationship between administrators and teachers. Purposed educational "communities" have been replaced by adversary "camps," and it is not uncommon to hear teachers depict administrators as "enemies" and visa versa. The point here is not to further that particular debate, but rather to cite the example of issues arising out of collective bargaining as only one arena where difficult policy questions compete for the superintendent's attention. On any given day the chief school officer may be called on to handle a promotion problem connected to Title IX legislation; an architect's blueprint for building renovations to bring the district in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act affecting handicapped; a due process matter associated with the suspension of a student; a charge by a community education alliance alleging that a teacher is a homosexual; a revision of the proposed budget; a busing accident, a court ordered desegration plan; or any number of other issues, large or small, originating from within or outside the school system per se.

Boyd has agreed that professional educators tend to dominate educational decision-making at the local level. He notes, however, the constraints

imposed by the local community, and he maintains Zeigler and Jennings exaggerate the power and dominance of the administrative staff. Boyd cogently states:

> These constraints (or put another way, the influence of the community) are likely to vary primarily with the type of school district and the type of policy issue that is faced. The local citizenry will tend to have more influence in external, redistributive, and strategic policy decision, and in smaller and more homogeneous communities, where the professionals tend to anticipate or reflect (especially in middle or upper middle class communities) community demands. The professionals, on the other hand, will tend to have more influence in internal and routine policy decisions and in larger and more hetergeneous communities.[9]

So Boyd adds to the comprehension of political leadership in local school districts. That is, the influence of administrators is more likely to be pre-empted in insular, tight knit communities and in cases where strategic, external policy issues have come to the fore. With respect to more routine, internal policy matters, the superintendent may remain the prime mover, for his technical expertise, gatekeeping abilities, and agenda building for board meetings serve to buttress his influence.

Mann has systematically investigated school leadership, community power and school boards. The preponderance of community power studies using the pluralist and elitist models of Dahl and Hunter is well documented. Mann cites the merits of research by Bachnach and Baratz which attempts to explain community power structures by the "use of nondecisions to determine issues."[10] That is, responsiveness to community pressure may be gauged by assessing school board inactivity or postponement of critical policy problems posed by constituent organizations. The superintendent's role in advising the board on when, where, and under what conditions to postpone decisions brought on by community forces requires further research. But data on school administrators' attitudes toward political bodies and their

legitimacy suggest a surprising degree of naivete. Mann found the "largest group of administrators, 35 per cent, indicated disapproval of any effects spilling over from the larger political arena to the educational arena; 28 per cent were indifferent to the possibility of political determination to educational affairs."[11] Approximately one-fourth of the administrators in this study saw interaction as "unavoidable and desirable." The administrators' continued aversion to "political questions" colors their behavior towards community constituents and mediates against constituent participation. Can school leaders afford to isolate themselves from popular political expressions by disapproval of such realities or by indifference? It may be that administrators would prefer to ignore outside interest groups. It is hazardous. For the superintendents and the school board to ignore the teachers' union, however, would be disastrous and next to impossible.

School board members who attempt to translate community values, especially fiscal values, frequently find themselves in collision with teachers associations. A partial explanation of teacher association-school board conflict lies in the recognition that collective bargaining in public education has been largely, if not wholly, adapted from the industrial negotiations model. Yet there are signs of public sector negotiations evolving in educationally specific directions. Recent contracts between school boards and unions, particularly in urban settings, have "provided for joint decision-making about the curriculum methodology, textbook selection, promotion to the principalship, screening and recommendation of candidates for openings in any level of the system, methods of achieving pupil and teacher integration in the system, and pupil discipline."[12] These may be uncomfortable messages for school boards and superintendents, and they may rightfully and strenuously disagree with incorporating such provisions in contracts.

School boards, thus, have been caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they perceive high risk in "bullying" the union, for such proactive policy may result in the union closing the schools. On the other hand, community norms and expectations frequently combine to change the elected school board members with the responsibility to keep teachers' union demands in check. Jimmy Breslin wrote "the reputation of power is power" in his book How the Good Guys Finally Won. School boards see unions as having a reputation of power, and this reputation, when coupled with demonstrable legal powers, adds to the board's dilemma. In light of these developments, not only must the school board constantly evaluate its place in addressing union demands, but also, the superintendents of school must reassess his/her stance in negotiations. The issue is that "imperial" superintendents and "majesterial" school boards risk heightened challenges to their perceived authority if they treat union representatives in a cavalier fashion. Risks may be warranted but surely the consequences of risks must be carefully computed.

Indelicateness in teachers' association dealings has no doubt contributed to the high turnover rate of school superintendents. Zeigler and Jennings report the average tenure for superintendents in their national study to be 8.2 years, but variance is high, for the standard deviation for superintendents' tenure is 7.4 years.[13] Wirt reports average tenure for urban superintendents to be four years, and metropolitan school districts have experienced a decline in the number of applicants for the office of chief school administrator.[14] In 1976-77 roughly ten per cent of the top leadership in 800 school systems in New York State retired, resigned, or were dismissed. The figures may be slippery but the unpredictability of tenure in office is clear-cut.

Role Revisions

The concept of an imperial school superintendent is mythical since the chief school administrator is neither a puppeteer nor a puppet. If superintendents act as puppeteers, then they may soon become unemployed. If superintendents act as puppets, then they are not worthy of descriptions as emperors. Imperial rule conjurs up visions of dynastic governance. There exist few central office dynasties in local school systems. What lies beyond the myth of the imperial superintendent? Discourse and dialogue about the essence of the superintendent's most critical roles must be undertaken, for the difficulty of leadership labels (imperial superintendent is but one) is that they fail to truly capture the richness of meaning associated with the position.

The role of the public school superintendent requires adjustment just as the role of the President of the United States needs realignment. In drawing the case for the redefinition of the duties of Presidents, Hess states that the "tasks currently performed badly by Presidents must be performed elsewhere,"[15] He objects to (quarrels with) the notion of the President as chief manager and instead suggests that the President is the chief political officer, charged with making highly significant political decisions. So must chief school administrators accept political leadership in the least pejorative sense. The following speculative conclusions are based on the earlier assessment of research and postulated in light of the turbulence surrounding the office of the school superintendent.

Superintendent turnover has escalated so rapidly in school systems that the job market is essentially wide open. The prospect for a long and peaceful reign is dim indeed. One consequence is that superintendents, like

the baseball superstars who have come off a banner year, are increasingly attempting to renegotiate their three- or five-year contracts with the board of education. In certain instances, superintendents retain attorneys who are the functional equivalents of baseball players' agents. This trend is at least one means of trying to ensure longevity in office. The survival strategy naturally has broad implications for the superintendent's ability to set a course for future policy-making in the district. More significant, perhaps, is the credibility achieved in the eyes of influential actors in the system. When a contract is successfully renegotiated, the event will likely be seen, at least in part, as an endorsement of the superintendent's leadership record. Conversely, the inability of a chief school administrator to renegotiate may lead to an even shorter tenure and subsequent resignation since the process of negotiation may become an issue unto itself, and board refusal may be properly interpreted by the incumbent as a sign of board disenchantment. Under these conditions, the superintendent obviously does not gain what is wanted, thus, the "imperial" nature of the position is imperiled. Risks are inherent in this approach, but the literature informs us that being a school superintendent is a risky occupation.

That is not to say that school administators have a high propensity for risk-taking. Brown discovered in a comparison of business and public school administrators that business administrators were significantly greater risk takers in their decisions.[16] On the personal variable of need for security, public school administrators recorded higher scores than their business counterparts. The need for security exhibited by school superintendents can be explained by the high turnover rate. The low degree of risk-taking behavior is not so easily understood. A reasonable argument can be made that superintendents, because of their low propensity for risk-taking,

and their refusal to acknowledge political interest groups, have misread the mood, desires and aspirations of community interest groups. If superintendents are able to develop skills as risk analysts, then it may be possible to improve interactions with local community leaders. A risk analyst is one who knows when to adopt a strong stand and when to permit others to crystallize an issue. By deciding to make themselves more accessible, more visible, and more anxious to hear community voices, superintendents may be taking greater risks but the dividends may be increased by shrewd risk analysis. Superintendents who pursue closer relations with community groups no doubt will find it terribly time-consuming. Yet, the time may be well spent if it results in greater sensitivity to community "will" as mirrored by policies aimed at specialized interests. To do so smacks of complicating decision processes by accepting political intrusions. Furthermore, alliances between chief school administrators and community interests will likely result in compromise, but compromise is the heart of political survival. Is there utility, as Mann's data suggest, in superintendents denying the existence of politically motivated special interests? The belief here is that non-recognition of political actors is as risky as acceptance of such forces.

Striking a balance between administrative autonomy and responsiveness to school board and constituent desires is the critical question for the school superintendent. Tension occurs in relations between superintendents, school boards, and community interest groups. Creative tension among school district actors, however, seems less likely so long as superintendents, like American presidents in Arthur Schlessinger's words, remain "prisoners of a single information system."[17] Superintendents' reliance on administrative staff personnel has functional limits. Dependence on technical data produced

by the "sycophants" of the central office may aid the superintendent in the "gatekeeping" capacity, but it may cut another way. That is, insulation from the divergent opinions of other political actors may result in the serious isolation of the superintendent to the point where the administrator is drastically removed from reality. Furthermore, to define all policy questions for all actors is presumptuous, for superintendents do not maintain a "monopoly of authoritative answers"[18] to complex educational problems anymore than American presidents manifest a cartel of solutions to lofty matters of state. Stated another way, superintendents must acknowledge the areas where they have the expertise to control debate and policy, and they must acknowledge where their talents are constrained. For the superintendent cannot be all things to all constituents.

One arena where superintendents may be hard-pressed to demonstrate authoritative answers is in collective bargaining with local teachers' associations. Collective negotiations in the public schools have provided full-time employment for attorneys versed in across-the-table bargaining and for educators who specialize exclusively in such matters. If the superintendent does not qualify as a "specialist," then there exists little reason to take a formal role in negotiations. School boards have educated themselves to a large extent and they may feel equipped to conduct negotiations. Yet boards increasingly contract with outside negotiators to orchestrate and govern the bargaining with teacher union representatives. Superintendents are not ignorant of this development, and they should posture themselves accordingly dependent on their confidence in their negotiating skills.

This caution applies to negotiations with the teachers' union, but negotiations with newly created middle-level administrative bargaining units

presents a different picture. Where administrative associations prevail, the superintendent may legitimately act as a negotiator for the board because typically chief school administrators have had more than tangential experience in the "ranks." Thus, they possess the knowledge to deal even-handedly with administrative negotiators who talk in the same language as the superintendent. If, as Neustadt concluded, presidential power is the power to persuade, then so must superintendents, as political officers, cultivate the art of persuasion with administrators and with other inside and outside interests.

A final observation centers on the graduate training programs for school administrators. Courses in school law have long been part of educational administration programs, and, more recently, offerings in the politics of education have appeared in the curriculum. Further course-work which integrates politics, law, and policy-making in local school systems seem warranted. By addressing research in politics and policy-making in local school districts, and by coupling the knowledge of these disciplines with the emergent legal aspects of education, especially in the field of special education, chief school administrators may avoid being labelled "pornographic" leaders.

> To the pornographic leader, things and events of the world appear as portable fragments. The long view is replaced by shortsightedness. Detail, but no pattern. The fresh outlook yields to a stereo-typed and biased one. Experiences and impressions, what there are of them seen through the lucid gray of a limousine window, cannot be fully valued and enjoyed because their character is lost.
>
> Our leaders must learn to embrace error and take risks, to explore in the presence of others. Almost like learning how to play the violin in public.
>
> Unless they do (and we permit them to), they will continue to sound as if they are talking through a plate-glass window, distant, isolated, removed from the complex lives of living people on the other side.[19]

Notes

1. L. Harmon Zeigler, M. Kent Jennings, G. Wayne Peak. Governing American Schools: Political Interaction in Local School Districts (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1974) p. 150.

2. See Gross, Mason, and McEachern Explorations in Role Analysis: Studies of the School Superintendency Role (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1958). This empirical study draws heavily on Chester Barnard's The Functions of the Executive. Richard Carlson employs "place-bound" and "career-bound" categories of school superintendents in Executive Succession and Organizational Change (Chicago: Midwest Administration Center, The University of Chicago, 1962). Superintendent turnover is analyzed in Iannaccone and Lutz, Politics, Power and Policy: The Governing of Local School Districts (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1970). Heneley examines role expectations in "A Typology of Conflict Between Superintendents and Their Reference Groups," (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1960). Superintendent-central office staff relations are critically reviewed by Cunningham, Governing Schools: New Approaches to Old Issues (Columbus Ohio· Merrill, 1971) and McGivney and Haight, "The Politics of Education: A View from the Perspective of the Central Office Staff." Educational Administration Quarterly, 8.3 (Autumn, 1972). The Machiavellian orientation of superintendents is studied and policy influence as perceived by superintendents, school board members, and other administrators is discussed in Volp, "The School Superintendent and Machiavellianism," Education 97.3 (Spring, 1977). Goldhammer chronicles superintendents' roles in "Role of the American School Superintendent, 1954-1974," Educational Administration: The Developing Decades, ed. by Cunningham, Hack, and Nystrand (Berkeley: McCutchen Publishing Company, 1977). The seventy-sixth yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II is entitled The Politics of Education, ed. by Jay D. Scribner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

3. See Cronin, "The School Superintendent in the Crucible of Urban Politics," in Toward Improved Urban Education, ed. by Lutz (Worthington, Ohio: Charles A. Jones Publishing Co., 1970), and The Control of Urban Schools (New York: Free Press, 1973); Gittell, Participants and Participation: A Study of School Policy in New York City (New York: Praeger, 1968); Rogers, 110 Livingston Street: Politics and Bureaucracy in the New York City School System (New York: Random House, 1968); Peterson, School Politics Chicago Style (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Cuban, Urban School Chiefs Under Fire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

4. David Hulburd, This Happened in Pasadena (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951).

5. Raymond E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Also see Callahan and Button, "Historical Change of the Role of the Man in the Organization, 1865-1950." Behavioral Science and Educational Administration, Vol. 63. Edited by Daniel Griffiths (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

6. Larry Cuban, Urban School Chiefs Under Fire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 120.

7. Ibid., p. 170.

8. M. Chester Nolte, "How Fast is the Power of Superintendents Slipping Away?" American School Board Journal, CLXI, No. 9 (September 1974), 42-46.

9. William L. Boyd, "The Public, The Professionals, and Educational Policy Making: Who Governs? Teachers' College Record, LXXVII, No. 4, (May 1976), 539-78.

10. Dale Mann, "School Boards and Power in Local Communities," in Understanding School Boards, ed. by Peter J. Cistone (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1975), p. 165. The concept of non-decisions prompted a further look at Bachrack and Baratz' notion, and Debnam's critique of it. The debate was examined in Volp, "Politics of Policy-Making Minority Stratagems." AERA Annual Meeting, April 1976, New York City. See abstract in Resources in Education (ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education: September 1977). ED 138701 microfiche.

11. Dale Mann, The Politics of Administrative Representation (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1976), p. 62.

12. Ronald G. Corwin, "The Organizational Context of School Board-Teacher Conflict," in Understanding School Boards, ed. by Peter J. Cistone (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1975), p. 132. The Cistone text includes papers written by fourteen scholars. The manuscripts were originally presented at a National School Board Association symposium in Miami Beach, April 1975.

13. Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

14. Frederick M. Wirt, "Social Diversity and School Board Responsiveness in Urban Schools," in Understanding School Boards, p. 201.

15. Stephen Hess, Organizing the Presidency (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1976), p. 147.

16. Julius S. Brown, "Risk Propensity in Decision-Making: A Comparison of Business and Public School Administrators," Administrative Science Quarterly, XV, No. 4 (December 1970), 473-481.

17. Arthur M. Schlessinger, Jr. The Imperial Presidency, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1973), p. 408.

18. George E. Reedy. The Twilight of the Presidency (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1970), p. 48.

19. Warren Bennis, "The Pornography of Everyday Life," The New York Times, November 28, 1976, Section 4, p. 15.